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SIX MONTHS OF FULLSCALE INDONESIAN INVASION -- A VICTORY FOR THE EAST TIMORESE REVOLUTION

A BACKGROUND PAPER by Denis Freney

It is almost six months since the Indonesian generals launched a fullscale invasion against the Democratic Republic of East Timor.

Six months of fullscale war by a regime which rules 130 million people, has an army of 350,000 and has continually raised the number of troops it has committed to East Timor from 15,000 on December 7 to over 40,000 today.

Despite this massive deployment of men and the machines of war ,including virtually the whole Indonesian navy, the Indonesian military dictatorship has plunged only deeper into crisis, as its troops are unable to crush the East Timorese people, despite the most inhuman barbarities.

Today, the generals control only 14 towns and villages,scattered throughout the country. Even in Dili, the capital, it is impossible for the Indonesians or their handful of stooges to venture out of the city limits by car,without inevitably being ambushed by Fretilin guerrillas operating around the outskirts of the city. For a city with only a population ,before the invasion, of 25,000, the insecurity of the Indonesians can be judged by such a situation.

The Merpati planes which land at Dili airport,only 8 kms. from the city, are continually hit by light arms fire. On the day, Jose Martins and the puppet government delegation left Dili last March for the United Nations, a Merpati plane was grounded because it was severely damaged.

This scene is repeated even more in towns inland from Dili. There, the Indonesian garrisons are confined to the towns (or villages by Australian standards), daring only to venture out under protection of tanks and armoured cars along the narrow, treacherous roads of the mountains. To go into the villages off the road, where the big majority of the population lives, is extremely hazardous,for the Fretilin guerrillas wait...

An indication of the extreme difficulties the Indonesians face, is the reliance they place on helicopters to carry supplies and reinforcements or replacements to the inland towns. This has resulted, according to Fretilin messages in Indonesian soldiers starving ,and in desperation leaving the relative sanctuary of their garrisoned towns, to search the surrounding mountains for the food they need. There they fall in ambush to Fretilin guerrillas, as amply shown by a series of Fretilin messages.

The deeper the Indonesians penetrate into the mountains, the greater their difficulties, the greater they find their supply lines liable to attack, and the greater the opportunities of Fretilin forces to launch attack after attack on relatively small garrisons, of under 200.

In such a situation, it is possible to speak of the past six months as being a victory for the East Timorese Revolution. For the East Timorese are fighting a people's war -- one which they will fight for a lengthy period, gradually bleeding the Indonesian military machine to death.

After six months, the Indonesians are already showing signs that the cost of the war are becoming unbearable. With over 10,000 dead, they have a corresponding number of penniless families ,spreading gloom throughout the country. The cost of the war (estimated at at least $10 million a month),

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is an unbearable burden for an economy plunged into crisis following the Pertamina scandal, with debts over $ 17 billion, and whose economy is in the hands of the international banks.

The Jakarta regime therefore has followed a strategy of fighting the war as a silent war. They do not even allow their own tame-cat journalists into East Timor. There is no attempt even to whip up chauvinist enthusiasm for the war. The Jakarta press is silent , without the on-the-spot reportage, suitably tailored to glorify the achievements of the Indonesian army. All that appears is an occasional report from Antara , quoting a puppet, or Malik.

The dead soldiers are buried without military honours; the families of the wounded are banned from visiting their loved ones in Jakarta's hospitals.

Can the Jakarta regime continue this silent war for another six months ? Can they suffer another 6,000 dead, and more wounded ? Can they continue to stonewall efforts to get humanitarian aid into East Timor, or continue to ban all independent observers and journalists ?

Nothing is more eloquent proof of Fretilin claims to be inflicting heavy losses on the Jakarta army, or of their claims to still control the big majority of the country, than the refusal of the Jakarta regime to allow any independent observers into East Timor.

The generals, responding to their failure , have unleashed a terror campaign against the people of East Timor. Fretilin constantly reports atrocities, massacres and plundering of the resources of their areas they control. Not only cars, washing machines, Chinese shops and anything that moves has been plundered, but even whatever part of the rice harvest they could seize , has been shipped back to Jakarta.

This has also been witnessed by the puppet ex-UDT and ex-APODETI leaders, who have found themselves without the wealth and privilege they expected as their pay-off for acting as agents for the Jakarta generals.

The Jakarta generals cannot be accused of subtelty : they even refuse to pay their stooges enough to keep them happy!

If some want to dismiss this as simply Fretilin propaganda, then they should ask the simple question : why do the generals refuse to allow a single Australian journalist into East Timor to see for him or herself ?

If the Indonesian generals think their brutality and massacres will cower the East Timorese, then they have not learnt the lessons of history. For they should know that such policies only solidify the people behind the guerrillas, when they are led by a determined revolutionary movement, with well-established roots among the people, with a conscious strategy of guerrilla warfare and prepared to fight a protracted war.

The Indonesian army in East Timor is best compared with a marauding army of the Middle Ages, in which plunder and massacre is the by-word. They do not even have the "divide-and-rule" strategy of the British, American or French imperialists in South-East Asia, which while unsuccessful in the main, made the task of the guerrillas much more difficult. The Indonesians seem intent on solidifying every single Timorese into a united whole, welded by a burning hatred of the invaders, and a longing for independence.

And of course, the Indonesian army is not the American army in Vietnam, or the British in Malaya, or the French in Algeria. The resources it has at its disposal are infinitely less (even though much more than the Timorese have). Their fighting forces are far less well trained, or even committed.

It is also true of course that Fretilin has not the resources at its disposal that other liberation movements have had, if only because it has no country on its borders which could serve as a base and a source of supplies. It is completely isolated by the Indonesian naval blockade. But it has at its disposal the arsenal abandoned by the Portuguese when they fled to the island of Atauro in August. Estimates by Australian authorities, including the JIO, said that the arsenal was enough for one or two years of guerrilla war. Certainly, from December 7 to 25 , Fretilin fought virtually a positional war around Dili and Baucau, and no doubt used up much of their stocks. But in recent months they have been concentrating much of their effort on capturing Indonesian weapons, which they have done with success, accordingto Fretilin reports.

Fretilin lacks above all heavy weapons , to put tanks and aircraft out of action, and to bombard Indonesian garrisons from a more distant range. With such weapons at their disposal , Fretilin could deliver an extremely heavy defeat on those Indonesian forces now in the mountains.

Is it being too optimistic to believe that Fretilin will confound all those who assumed from December 7 that the integration of East Timor into Indonesia was all over bar the shouting ?

Certainly, the optimism expressed here is shared by Fretilin leaders inside and outside East Timor. And if we are incorrect in our estimates, and the Indonesians correct, why do the latter not take journalists into the country to prove their point ? Why do they not even allow their own journalists in ?

It is our belief that the realities of the East Timorese revolutionary struggle will have to be faced not only in Jakarta, but also in Canberra, Washington and Tokyo. In Canberra, Peter Hastings, who acts in an advisory capacity to the Joint Intelligence Organisation (JIO) , was one of the few conservative observers of the East Timor crisis who warned the dangers of a guerrilla war bleeding the Indonesian army to death. Elsewhere, the gurus of Foreign Affairs added up the numbers in each army, the firepower available, and the geo political situation, and assumed Indonesian control would only take a matter of months.

It will be necessary for the imperialist powers to review their attitudes, and in that there also lies dangers that should not be underestimated. But more on that later.

The crisis facing Indonesia in East Timor will inevitably be reflected inside the army and the regime. Already, there are plenty of pointers to rumblings among generals, due, it is true, at this stage mainly to the economic crisis, but also increasingly due to the failure of the East Timor invasion.

How, who and when change will come in Indonesia is still a major question mark. It may be too early to predict a change , even in terms of one set of generals replacing another, in the coming months. But by December 7 1976 it will certainly not be impossible.

But that change will come , and not in many years time, is certain.

It is difficult to estimate how much the growing worldwide condemnation of the Indonesian invasion has effected the Jakarta regime.

It must be remembered that Indonesia has always sought to keep a foot in the Non-Aligned camp, by maintaining a faked immage of "independence". It has above all sought to maintain stability in the region, while on occasions voting with the Third World bloc against imperialism.

Today, Indonesia is becoming increasingly isolated. It is important to note that Indonesia has always since 1965 put much importance on its friendly relations with Islamic countries. Its biggest overseas embassy for example is in Algeria.

Yet Algeria is one of the strongest supporters of the East Timorese struggle: Minister Mari Alcatiri has visited Algiers twice in recent months, and is currently on a visit to Libya, Syria and Irak, before going to Somalia.

This represents a severe diplomatic setback for Indonesia, which should not be underestimated. Second, [illegible] Fretilin has very widespread support in Africa, particularly among the former Portuguese colonies, as well as among all the progressive countries, such as Tanzania, while others such as Zambia also backs Fretilin.

Lastly, in Australia, Indonesia is under severe criticism and concrete action, as never before. The effect of the strong trade union, student and church opposition to the Indonesian invasion cannot be underestimated.

As in any war of national liberation, the East Timorese struggle cannot win without the external struggle supplementing the internal. While the internal struggle is determinant, the diplomatic efforts of the DRET Ministers abroad, and the worldwide solidarity movement can quicken the withdrawal of Indonesian troops.

Fierce fighting continues in East Timor, as Radio Maubere broadcasts on May 21 and 23 amply show. The Indonesian major offensive of mid-April has allowed them to capture Ermera and Atsabe. However their grip is always tenuous: according to the May 21 broadcast an entire Indonesian camp at Tocoluli on the road from Aileu to Ermera was destroyed, with as yet unknown casualties. In Aileu, a town seized on December 29, 845 Indonesians were killed between January 20 and April 3 in the surrounding area alone.

What of the future ? In the next six months the Indonesians will find it increasingly difficult to maintain this war, particularly as the perspective of it lasting for years confronts them. Imperialism, too, will either substantially boost its aid to the generals, or alternatively seek to find a way out, in which the conservative ex-UDT leaders, who now are making their opposition to Indonesia known, could be introduced as a factor into a "solution" which would grant some form of independence, but tied to Fretilin acceptance of such elements, and, in fact, of a neo-colonial solution. It is for this reason that the defection of men like Martins and the possible later defections ex-UDT leaders should be seen and viewed with some caution.

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